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ABSTRACT

Because of increased pressure for educational improvement, school principals have assumed new roles and responsibilities in school administration. Thus, principals have to prioritize their job responsibilities and allocate their time accordingly. This study investigates the importance school principals assign to their various job responsibilities and the proportion of time they devote to carrying them out. The aim of the study was to discover discrepancies between principals' priorities and their realities, probe reasons for these differences, and identify steps and strategies principals can use to bring the two more into alignment. Results showed that many principals spend a large amount of time performing routine management-type activities, often unpredicted and of short duration, plus "putting out fires." Student interaction and discipline also take up much time, as do budgetary difficulties. Keeping up-to-date as a professional was commonly ranked as a low priority. Recommendations include good planning along with consulting faculty and staff members; prioritizing goals and making them specific; reviewing plans periodically; creating a more engaging, demanding, concept-based, and level-appropriate curriculum; maintaining good time and stress management; and maintaining a sense of humor. (Contains 30 references.) (RT)

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PRINCIPALS' PRIORITIES VERSUS THEIR REALITIES: REDUCING THE GAP

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PRINCIPALS' PRIORITIES VERSUS THEIR REALITIES: REDUCING THE GAP

by Tak Cheung Chan and Harbison Pool

Because of increased pressure for educational improvement in recent years, school principals have assumed new roles in school administration (Bradshaw, 2000; Campbell & Williamson, 1991; Lemahieu, Roy & Foss, 1997). Consequently, their responsibilities in school have substantially increased (Hoer, 1996; Portin, 2000). Today, school principals have to prioritize their job responsibilities and, to the extent it is possible and desirable, allocate their time accordingly.

Purpose

This study investigates the importance school principals assign to their various job responsibilities and the proportion of time they devote to carrying them out. The researchers wanted (a) to discover discrepancies between principals' priorities and their realities, (b) to probe reasons for these differences, and (c) to identify steps and strategies principals who wish to do so can use to bring the two more into alignment (i.e., to reduce the gap).

Theoretical Framework

As an effective school leader, the principal has many responsibilities (Campo, 1993; Carlin, 1992; Gillat & Azaroff, 1994; Larsen & Malen, 1997; Lemahieu, Roy, & Foss, 1997; McGee, 1997; Murphy, 1990; Niece, 1993; Parker & Day, 1997; Quinn & Troy-Quinn, 1999; Stronge, 1993). In performing his or her daily duties, the principal has too many commitments, pressures, decisions, demands, and interruptions—indeed, just too little time (Black, 2000; Bradshaw, 2000; Campbell & Williamson, 1991; Hoerr, 1996; Niece, 1993; Trump, 1996). A number of studies have been conducted to examine the job priorities of the school principal (Blendinger & Snipes, 1996; Carlin, 1992; Johnson, 1999; McGee, 1997; Stronge, 1993; Trump, 1996; Whitaker & Turner, 2000; Whale, 2000). Researchers agree that school principals must work on their job priorities and time distribution to be effective administrators (Campbell & Williamson, 1991; Carlin, 1992; Halverson, 1983; Heck & Marcoulides, 1993; Hoerr, 1996). Other studies recommend that school principals

undergo time management training (Heck & Marcoulides, 1993; Tanner, Schnittjer, & Atkins, 1991). Further, principals' time management studies performed by Patterson (1985) and Petersen and Beekley (1997) identify some of the factors that negatively affect school principals' use of time. They also found that female principals aligned their time management strategies more closely with their work priorities than did their male counterparts.

Significance of the Study

Related studies were found in the review of literature. However, some features of this study plough new ground. This study (a) provides an up-to-date look at which of their duties and responsibilities today's principals believe to be of the highest priority; (b) throws new light onto how school principals manage their time; (c) shows where and why discrepancies between principals' priorities and realities exist; (d) addresses differences among elementary school, middle school, and high school levels; and (e) identifies ways in which principals can reduce the gap between how they think they should spend their time and how they do spend their time. At a time when there is a national concern about educational accountability and outcome-based assessment, principals should, the researchers believe, find it helpful to be able to align their job priorities more closely with their time allocations. The present investigators think that this study's findings and recommendations will contribute to principals' effort to do so.

Research Questions

This study was designed to explore quantitative answers to a number of questions, including the following:

1. How do school principals rank the importance of their work responsibilities?
2. How do school principals rank the amount of time spent on fulfilling their work responsibilities?
3. Is there any significant difference between the principals' ranking of work importance and the amount of time devoted to work responsibilities?

4. Does principals' sex make any difference in their ranking of work importance and the amount of time spent on work responsibilities?

Methodology

The researchers randomly selected 134 principals from southeast Georgia schools (67 elementary, 30 middle, and 37 high) for participation in this study; though a minority at the secondary level, females were well represented at all levels (see Table 1). In each instance a trained associate asked the principal to answer a survey instrument and then posed questions in a brief follow-up interview. All data collection and interviews were completed in the Fall of 2000.

Table 1. Study Participants, by Level and Gender

School Level	Male		Female		Overall	
	Number	%/Level	Number	%/Level	Number	%/Total
Elementary	33	49.3	34	50.7	67	50.0
Middle	17	56.7	13	43.3	30	28.4
High	26	70.3	11	29.7	37	27.6
Total	76	56.7	58	43.3	134	100.0

The 134 survey respondents were invited to rank the importance of their work responsibilities and the time spent on those responsibilities. The survey instrument was researcher-designed, adapted from protocols the investigators had employed in previous studies (Chan, Pool, & Wooddy, 2000; Pool, Chan, & Olson, 1999)—drawn from experience, pilot studies, and prior research reported in the literature (including Gottfredson & Hybl, 1987) to include 13 responsibilities of school principals: supervision and instructional support, school improvement, staff development, personnel administration, policy review and development, professional update (reading current professional literature and otherwise keeping up with what is going on in the fields of education and leadership), curriculum planning and development, student interaction and discipline, public relations, systemwide duties, school emergencies, school business administration (budgeting,

building and campus maintenance, student transportation, school food service, etc.), and student extracurricular activities.

Wilcoxon's paired sample test was employed to analyze rank differences between the principal's responsibilities and the time spent. Kruskal-Wallis's test was used to examine if gender and school level were factors affecting the principals' ranking of responsibilities and time devoted to achieving them.

In addition, analysis of qualitative data gathered through interviews with study participants yielded insights into why these principals spent their work time as they did and why they perceived that any discrepancies that occurred between their work-area priorities and how they actually allocated their work time existed.

Findings

School principals participating in this study ranked supervision and instructional support as their most important responsibility, followed by school improvement, staff development, curriculum planning and development, and personnel administration (see Table 2). Among responsibilities listed in the survey, responding school principals ranked student extracurricular activities, policy review and development, systemwide duties, handling school emergencies, and keeping up-to-date professionally of lowest priority. As even a cursory review of Table 2 will reveal, participating principals from elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools were amazingly similar in their ranking of the importance of their various work responsibilities. The present study is by no means, however, the first investigation to have arrived at this counterintuitive finding (see, for example, the well-known ASCD study reported by Smith and Andrews [1989]).

School principals also were asked to examine the time they actually spend in the daily operation of their schools and to rank accordingly the 13 work areas explored in this study (see Table 3). It is probably not surprising to practitioners and careful observers in the field that principals at all levels listed student interaction and discipline as their most time-costly daily enterprise. Though differences occurred after that, all also noted that their second most time-consuming responsibility

was that of personnel administration. On average, rounding out the top 5 were staff development, supervision and instructional support, and public relations. Overall rankings of responsibilities to which responding principals spent the least time were policy review and development, professional update, student extracurricular activities, system-wide duties, and school business administration

Table 2. Principals' Composite Ranking of Importance of Job Responsibilities, by School Level

Responsibilities	Elementary	Middle	High	Overall
Supervision/instructional support	1	1	1	1
School improvement	2	2	2	2
Staff development	3	5	3	3
Curriculum planning/development	4	3	4	4
Personnel administration	5	4	6	5
Student interaction/discipline	6	6	5	6
Public relations	7	7	7	7
School business administration	8	8	8	8
Professional update	9	9	9	9
School emergencies	10	10	10	10
Systemwide duties	11	12	11	11
Policy review/development	12	11	13	12
Student extracurricular activities	13	13	12	13

. Though there were a number of similarities among rankings, high school principals in this study devote much more time to school emergencies than do elementary principals, whereas elementary principals in this population engaged in curriculum planning and development for a higher portion of their work time than did their high school counterparts. Not surprisingly, high school principals spend more of their time involved with student extracurricular activities than do principals surveyed who serve at lower levels.

Table 3. Principals' Composite Ranking of Time Spent on Job Responsibilities, by School Level

Responsibilities	Elementary	Middle	High	Overall
Student interaction/discipline	1	1	1	1
Personnel administration	2	2	2	2
Staff development	3	4	3	3
Supervision/instructional support	6	3	6	4
Public relations	4	5	4	5
Curriculum planning/development	5	6	9	6
School improvement	7	8	7	7
School emergencies	10	7	5	8
School business administration	8	10	11	9
Systemwide duties	9	12	10	10
Student extracurricular activities	11	11	8	11
Professional update	13	9	12	12
Policy review/development	12	13	13	13

Treatment of survey data revealed significant differences between the importance participating principals placed on their job responsibilities and the time they spent in executing those responsibilities. School principals' ranking of job importance and ranking of time spent were compared by using the non-parametric Wilcoxon Test. *Z*-values as a result of the test indicated significant differences existed in all areas of responsibilities at the .01 level except for school business administration, public relations, and policy review and development (see Table 4).

When the findings of elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools were examined horizontally, significant differences between the principals' rankings of job importance and time spent were found throughout all school levels in the following responsibilities: student extracurricular activities, school emergencies, supervision and instructional support, school improvement, systemwide duties, and student interaction and discipline. No significant difference was found at

any level in school business administration or in policy review and development. This is to say that there were only 2 of the 13 work responsibility areas investigated that the 134 elementary, middle school, and high school principals who participated in this study across the board (at all levels) devoted time proportionally to the priorities they placed on those job responsibilities.

Table 4. Principals' Ranking of Importance of Responsibilities Relative to Time They Devoted to These Responsibilities, by School Level (the Wilcoxon Z-Test)

Responsibilities	Elementary *Z*-value	Middle *Z*-value	High *Z*-value	Overall *Z*-value
School business administration	-.673[a]	-1.138[a]	-1.377[a]	-1.607[a]
Student extracurricular activities	-3.948[b]**	-3.361[b]**	-3.708[b]**	-6.343[b]**
School emergencies	-2.757[b]**	-2.193[b]*	-3.211[b]**	-4.752[b]**
Supervision/instructional support	-6.241[b]**	-2.624[a]**	-3.856[a]**	-7.702[a]**
Professional update	-3.910[a]**	-.342[a]	-2.363[a]*	-4.102[a]**
Curriculum planning/development	-2.087[a]*	-1.909[a]	-2.738[a]**	-3.949[a]**
Public relations	-2.025[b]*	-.345[b]	-.631[b]	-1.933[b]
Personnel administration	-2.508[b]*	-.636[b]	-.772[b]	-2.561[b]**
School improvement	-4.879[a]**	-2.941[a]**	-3.614[a]**	-6.765[a]**
Policy review/development	-.118[a]	-1.654[a]	-.081[a]	-.952[a]
Systemwide duties	-5.124[b]**	-2.332[b]*	-2.410[b]*	-5.997[b]**
Staff development	-2.003[a]*	-.345[a]	-1.934[a]	-2.746[a]**
Student interaction/discipline	-4.190[b]**	-2.301[b]*	-2.217[b]*	-5.222[b]**

[a]Based on negative ranks. [b]Based on positive ranks.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Does principals' gender make a difference regarding how these designated school leaders view their work priorities and how they function on the job? The Kruskal-Wallis Test was used to analyze if a significant difference existed between male and female principals in their rankings of job importance and the time they spent in executing their responsibilities.

Results of the testing showed no significant difference between male and female principals' overall ranking of job importance, except in personnel administration (see Table 5). Male principals surveyed placed more importance on personnel administration than did responding female principals. Significant differences were found at both the elementary level ($p < .05$) and the middle school level ($p < .01$).

Male high school principals ranked student extracurricular activities at a statistically significantly higher level than did their female counterparts at that level ($p < .01$). Male middle school principals judged their systemwide duties to be of a significantly higher priority than did female middle school principals (at the .05 level).

Table 5. Differences Between Male and Female Principals in Their Ranking of the Importance of Their Responsibilities, by School Level (the Kruskal-Wallis Test)

Responsibilities	Elementary χ^2	Middle χ^2	High χ^2	Overall χ^2
School business administration	.969	2.235	1.374	.851
Student extracurricular activities	.125	.411	8.686**	1.904
School emergencies	.121	1.206	.846	.007
Supervision/instructional support	1.368	1.130	.834	.386
Professional update	.296	.610	.091	.008
Curriculum planning/development	.668	1.404	.252	.074
Public relations	.337	.548	1.533	.432
Personnel administration	4.160*	11.274**	.112	10.356**
School improvement	.097	3.766	.271	.913
Policy review/development	.151	.337	.093	.388
Systemwide duties	.365	5.034*	.159	3.163
Staff development	.159	.195	.150	.148
Student interaction/discipline	.000	1.815	2.173	.003

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

In their overall ranking of time spent on fulfilling responsibilities, male and female principals were significantly different ($p < .05$) in their ranking of student extracurricular activities (see Table 6). The only significant difference in this responsibility by level came at the high school, with male secondary principals reporting that they devote a considerably greater proportion of their time to student extracurricular activities than do their female colleagues at the same level ($p < .01$).

Female elementary principals ranked school improvement activities to be of a significantly higher priority than did male elementary principals ($p < .05$). The same can be said for female high school principals by comparison with their male counterparts in both the work responsibility areas of systemwide duties and student interaction and discipline ($p < .05$ in both instances).

Table 6. Differences Between Male and Female Principals in Their Ranking of the Time Spent on Their Responsibilities, by School Level (the Kruskal-Wallis Test)

Responsibilities	Elementary χ^2	Middle χ^2	High χ^2	Overall χ^2
School business administration	.063	2.477	1.682	.182
Student extracurricular activities	.000	1.021	12.312**	4.691*
School emergencies	.029	.000	.156	.011
Supervision/instructional support	.650	.446	1.833	.141
Professional update	.645	.049	.762	1.118
Curriculum planning/development	.088	.002	.577	.005
Public relations	.037	.982	.557	1.187
Personnel administration	.141	.030	1.205	.678
School improvement	4.143*	.825	1.737	1.795
Policy review/development	2.577	1.603	.157	2.086
Systemwide duties	2.393	1.766	6.188*	.101
Staff development	.028	.664	1.459	1.230
Student interaction/discipline	.002	.994	4.955*	.651

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Discussion

A review of interview data reveals much that the statistics do not show, or at least do not show in depth. One conspicuous finding a researcher observes in analyzing the qualitative material is that some principals are very different from one another, as are the schools they serve. Many principals at all levels emphasized the importance of being visible. Good student relations, faculty-staff relations, and external public relations are, to many principals, a critical early step in achieving an effective school. One middle school principal ranked good parent and community relations very high, but noted that it did not consume all that much of her time to achieve good school PR.

Many principals recognized that routine management-type activities, often unpredicted and of short duration, and "putting out fires" take up a great amount of their day. Many decry this, although others consider it an unavoidable reality. Principals who are known for their good organizational skills and time devoted to advance planning appear to be more "on top" of the most mundane aspects of their jobs; often this comes with experience, although some veteran principals also acknowledge that they are more concerned with low-level activities than they would like. One middle school principal indicated that she wishes she could devote more time to reflecting and less to reacting. Similarly, a high school principal said that she cannot do many of the positive things she would like to do because of the time spent reacting to negative things.

One high school principal said he leaves "the visionary stuff" to staff members, noting that he is "a great delegator." By contrast, another high school principal devotes almost all of his school-day time to school improvement, supervision and instructional management, staff development, and curriculum matters. His assistant principals handle virtually all student discipline and disorder problems.

Most principals at all levels spend a significant amount of time engaged in student interaction and discipline. For many principals, this is not the way they would like it to be. However, one elementary principal pointed out that, although she places a high priority on school improvement and staff supervision, she has help with these matters and is able to accomplish them to her satisfaction

in the amount of time she is able to allocate thereto. Clearly, however, this is not the perception of most of the principals in this study.

A number of interviewees commented on the importance of team spirit among their faculty and staff. One high school principal said that individualism is great and encouraged, but that, "if important changes are going to occur schoolwide, all members of the instructional and support team must `be pretty much on the same page.'" The merit of "teamness" was also noted by several principals with regard to the value of student extracurricular activities. One male high school principal remarked that, "often it is the kids who otherwise would be big troublemakers who get involved in sports and other extracurricular activities" and that he views this as a positive development, particularly because of "the self-discipline they often gain from such activities."

Several principals noted budgetary difficulties as both time consumers and as obstacles to their executing their job responsibilities in the best possible way. One elementary principal from "a poor rural district" said that "the lack of necessary funds drives everything we do."

Even though not ranked in the top five in importance, a number of principals interviewed spoke of the importance of keeping abreast of the latest research, teaching strategies, and curriculum. It should be noted that, whereas principals at all levels ranked *professional update* in ninth place in relative importance, only middle school principals' time-spent ranking coincided, and it was they who commented most frequently about the benefits of keeping abreast of what is new in the field. One middle school principal said that he found national reform movements, workshops, and education articles all to be particularly helpful. A high school principal said that he believes his school is better because he is always bringing new ideas to individual staff members and into faculty meetings and inservice sessions.

Recommendations

Most principals surveyed agreed that they would like to bring their realities more in line with their ideals. This is to say that the time devoted to their primary work responsibilities was more

closely aligned with the priorities they place on those responsibilities. The researchers offer the following recommendations toward this end:

1. Principals should begin with planning. They should give their own best thinking to what they do well now and where their weaknesses are, what they most want to accomplish and when, and what goals they should establish to reach these desired aims. They should consult with faculty and staff members, parents, the professional literature, central office colleagues, and professors in their leadership program to flesh out their short-, mid-, and long-term design. New and early-career principals should involve their mentors at every step of the process; those who do not have mentors should get them. Those who can help achieve the goals should buy in to them and understand their roles in achieving the established targets.
2. Goals should be prioritized and specific. Exactly what is desired must be spelled out in great detail. Strategies and participants should be delineated. Target dates and deadlines should be established.
3. Principals should identify what a good school should look like and where theirs fall short. They should endeavor to answer, with help when needed, such questions as these: What will it take to narrow the gap? What obstacles can be identified? What are possible ways to overcome or minimize the problems?
4. Plans should be reviewed at periodic times, with revisions made where required. Abandoning still desirable goals is not an acceptable option.
5. A more engaging, demanding, concept-based, level-appropriate curriculum that addresses the individual needs of students will reduce the need for overt discipline. Exciting, student-involved activities and other good teaching-learning approaches are also critical. Students should take part in daily and weekly goal setting; they should also evaluate their progress in reaching the goals they have set, making adjustments and new goals when called for.

6. Team or departmental coordination is essential for teachers at all levels so that there is a common broad direction for curriculum, instruction, and attention to students' academic and other needs. Teachers, principals, and internal and external consultants should share what works with particular children and youth. Individual students should be monitored and reviewed by teams of teachers and specialists, with an eye on what is found successful and what found wanting. Promising ideas must be tried and evaluated. Teachers, then, will ultimately effectively confront many problems and potential problems right in their classrooms. Third-party intervention, when required, should also be coordinated with classroom teachers, so that there is consistency and logical progression in all strategies used to cope with misbehavior and academic problems.
7. Inservice education for teachers should target areas of need, be multi-pronged, and always have in-staff follow-up.
8. Principals who have assistant principals should create a leadership team, with all members of the team at least aware of all the roles and possibilities. Many principals will find it worthwhile to shift emphases from time to time for all members of the team. Frequent (at least weekly) short leadership team meetings, usually with a written agenda, will be found helpful to many principals. Sometimes these meetings will occur after regular school hours, but some principals also find 5- to 10-minute, early-in-the-morning stand-up meetings around their desks or conference tables to be beneficial. Principals should also meet with their teacher leaders.
9. Sometimes, it may be better to try to overcome shortcomings, rather than always just to delegate "away" those duties with which a principal may be less comfortable or to find of lower value.

10. Time management, stress management, and a sense of humor are essential. Ultimately, those who do not love the job most of the time usually do not do it very well.

Conclusion

Most principals at all levels can identify reasons for undesirable differences between how they spend their time and how they think they should spend their time if they wanted their schools to be as good as possible. By following the recommendations the researchers have tendered above, they should be better able to devote less time to lower-priority responsibilities and more to duty areas on which they place a higher value.

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